

‘[A] treacherous allusion’: Robert Southey, Agincourt and the Hundred Years War

Abstract

The Battle of Agincourt (1415) has played a central role in celebrations of English national heroism. This article examines one of the most important challenges within English culture to the battle’s status, Robert Southey’s poem, *Joan of Arc* (1796). The essay analyses why the poem was written, how it set out to change national views about Agincourt but why, ultimately, even Southey came to accept he had failed. Southey was more successful in critiquing Agincourt through his best-selling work *Wat Tyler* (1794), which played a key role in creating an alternative, radical method of remembering the Hundred Years War.

Keywords

Southey; Agincourt; epic; radicalism; war

The celebration of great battles has played a central role in the development of narratives of English national identity and the Battle of Agincourt (1415) has had a particularly prominent place in these narratives.¹ But English culture also contains alternative, radical versions of many of these conflicts. Some of these counter-narratives have received extended critical attention, but one that has not is controversy about the status of Agincourt.² This article corrects this situation by examining how Robert Southey’s epic poem *Joan of Arc* (1796) attempted to make its audience rethink their view of the most famous battle of

the Hundred Years War.³ Southey was a leading poet, journalist, biographer, social commentator and historian of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-centuries and his poem attracted a great deal of attention and controversy.⁴ But while aspects of Southey's poem have received recent critical attention, what it has to say about Agincourt has largely been overlooked.⁵ This article argues that Southey's attempt to attack national views of the battle were central to his aims in *Joan of Arc* and that, while he had limited success in changing Agincourt's image, he did manage to find other ways of contesting memories of the Hundred Years War that have been of lasting significance.

The 'mainstream' view of Agincourt in English culture that *Joan of Arc* attempted to contest was firmly established by the time Southey embarked on his epic poem; the battle's status as the pre-eminent victory over France in the Middle Ages – and one of the nation's most glorious successes of any age – was of long standing. Henry V had attempted to securely embed the commemoration of the battle into the nation's life. However, the methods he chose, the celebration of Saints – St Crispin and St Crispinian and St John of Beverley, whose veneration was associated with the day of the battle (25 October) – did not survive the Reformation's destruction of the cult of saints and the creation of a new, shifting Tudor and Stuart national calendar of celebrations, such as Elizabeth I's accession (17 November), the defeat of the Armada (12 August) and Guy Fawkes Day (5 November).⁶ Instead, the primary methods of preserving the memory of Agincourt in the long term were cultural rather than institutional. This trend was in large part due to the efforts of historians and chroniclers – the many anonymous *Brut* chroniclers of the fifteenth century, William Caxton's *Cronycles of England* (1480), *The First English Life of King Henry the Fifth* (1513), Robert

Fabyan's *New Chronicles of England and France* (1516), Edward Hall's *Union of the Two Illustre Families of Lancaster and York* (1542) and the famous combiner of all these works, Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1586-7).⁷ But from very early on there was always a literary element to this commemoration in the form of song, poetry and drama: ranging from the early fifteenth-century Agincourt carol 'Deo gratia Anglia redde pro victoria!', through the fifteenth-century poem 'The Siege of Harfleur and the Battle of Agincourt', which was once attributed to John Lydgate, to, most famously of all, William Shakespeare's *The Life of Henry the Fifth* (1599).⁸

Given the importance of literature in preserving the memory of Agincourt, it is not surprising that the most important challenge to the celebration of the battle came in the form of a poem, Southey's *Joan of Arc* (1796). But aspects of these earlier, celebratory literary forms make it clear why the battle retained an important place in popular historical memory and why it was exceptionally difficult to challenge the idea of Agincourt as something to celebrate. It was common, for instance, to emphasise that this was a victory of David over Goliath – a vastly outnumbered English force had defeated the knights of France. If no author went quite as far as to claim that '21 Englishmen had put to flight 12,000 Frenchmen in a marsh', as Suffolk schoolboys recorded in their exercises in the 1430s, it was certainly the case that the English were 'we happy few', as Shakespeare has Henry V say.⁹ Moreover, while this was a victory for the skill and bravery of an English monarch, who directed and inspired his troops in battle, it was also a victory for the 'common man', as exemplified by the English bowman's triumph over the French knights on horseback, an aspect of English accounts of the battle that was emphasised as early as the fifteenth century *Brut*

chronicles.¹⁰ The whole nation was invited to take pride in Agincourt and the superior martial skills of the English compared to the French.

Moreover, these works tended to appear, or to be revived, when conflict with the French was looming or actual. They served to reflect and reinforce contemporary patriotic feelings and Francophobia, as well as to celebrate the past. So, for instance, Michael Drayton's poem, *The Battle of Agincourt* (1627), best known now for its first line, 'Fair stood the wind for France', was published at the time of the Anglo-French war of 1627-29; Thomas Goodwin's *History of the Reign of Henry the Fifth* (1704) appeared during the War of the Spanish Succession against France; and the definitive 'Agincourt play', Shakespeare's *The Life of Henry the Fifth*, was performed at Covent Garden every year during the Seven Years war against France of 1756-63 – tellingly, the playbills at this time often advertised performances as '*Henry the Fifth: With the Conquest of the French at Agincourt*'.¹¹ In these circumstances, remembering Agincourt was a patriotic duty.

As Agincourt was so well-established in the national consciousness, its status could only be challenged under particular circumstances, and only then with great difficulty. The most likely occasion on which the predominant way of viewing of Agincourt might be disputed was when the country was engaged in a conflict with France that was controversial within Britain and that many British people opposed. The most prominent occasion when this occurred was when Britain and France went to war on 1 February 1793. Most conservatively-minded people supported the war, both to expel French forces from the Low Countries, which they had occupied in 1792, and to oppose the principles of the French Revolution, which had taken a decidedly more radical turn with the execution of

Louis XVI in January 1793. But the Revolution had many sympathisers in Britain, who objected to a war with France when it was home of the principles of liberty, republicanism and religious equality embodied in the Declaration of the Rights of Man (1789) and the French Convention elected in 1792; and who felt the war against France had been engineered by reactionary forces in Europe who were determined to crush the new Republic.¹²

In these circumstances it was possible for opposing views about Agincourt to emerge. On the one hand, amongst the deluge of patriotic effusions that the war brought forth, there was a surge of material celebrating the victory of 25 October 1415. Shakespeare's *Henry the Fifth* was performed sixteen times between 1789 and 1792 as tensions with France rose, with John Kemble, the leading actor of the day, in the central role. After war was declared, the play was often revived, with the takings from one performance in 1803 donated to the 'Patriotic Fund' and the play concluding with an 'Occasional Address to the Volunteers' by Charles Kemble.¹³ Michael Drayton's *Battle of Agincourt* was republished in 1793 and there was a rush of more populist material such as the ballads *King Henry the Fifth's Conquest of France* (1795) and Charles Dibdin's song, 'The Bowmen of Kent' (1792).¹⁴ The representative arts were not far behind, as witnessed by the statue of Henry V 'in armour - in imitation of the dress he wore at the battle of Agincourt' commissioned by the Corporation of Monmouth and erected at the Town Hall in 1792; and the depiction of Agincourt in one of four works given by John Boydell to the Corporation of the City of London in 1794.¹⁵ As loyal subjects were eager to point out, 25 October was not only the anniversary of Agincourt but also of the accession of George III in 1760 – a 'stimulating omen'.¹⁶

But Radicals were not willing to be silenced in their opposition to the war and their defence of the principles of the French Revolution. They responded not just with speeches and newspaper articles but with novels and poetry that defended the 'Jacobin' cause.¹⁷ Among the group of aspiring Radical writers was Robert Southey – still only eighteen in 1793. He had been composing poetry extensively since childhood and was determined to seal his fame by producing an epic. His historical interests were wide-ranging (he was later to become an historian of Brazil and of the Peninsular War) and he had toyed with the idea of national epics on subjects as diverse as Brutus, Richard III, King Egbert of Wessex and Cassivellaunus.¹⁸ But the war with France sent him in a new direction. In July 1793 he decided his first epic poem would be set in France during the Hundred Years War and that he intended to directly challenge the celebratory discourse that surrounded that conflict. As he told his friend, Grosvenor Charles Bedford, he intended to 'allot the Genius of Liberty to defend the French from Ambition – Hatred – Slaughter & England. no railing Bedford - - Ambition Hatred Envy Slaughter Injustice & England – were they not allied in Henrys time?'¹⁹

To convince the British reading public of this proposition, Southey would necessarily have to contradict the predominant view of Agincourt, as it was undoubtedly the most famous English victory of the Hundred Years War. However, he decided the best way he could attempt this task was by *not* concentrating on the battle itself. Instead, he would write about the Hundred Years War from a French perspective; and he would focus on a French epic hero, rather than on Henry V. The subject Southey chose was Joan of Arc and the French victories at Orleans and Patay in 1429, the turning points in the Hundred

Years War that led eventually to the final French victories in 1453. Agincourt would be dealt with in Southey's poem but only marginally and in retrospect; and it would be contextualised as only one English success within an overall narrative of French victory. Southey believed that in both 1429 and 1793 a French victory was just and right, and if an English audience could be brought to see this for the Hundred Years War, they might accept it in the 1790s. Quite as much as any patriotic performance of *Henry the Fifth*, Southey's poem was meant to have a contemporary application. As Southey defiantly stated in his 'introduction' to *Joan of Arc* (1796):

[I]t has been established as a necessary rule for the Epic, that the subject be national. To this rule I have acted in direct opposition, and chosen for the subject of my poem the defeat of my country. If among my readers there be one who can wish success to injustice, because his countrymen supported it, I desire not that man's approbation.²⁰

The composition of Southey's poem proved rather a complex process, though. After he read up on the events connected to Joan of Arc's life in some standard histories, the first draft was written in six weeks in August-September 1793.²¹ As was traditional for epic poems, this version ran to twelve books and dealt with a fairly concentrated series of events in Joan's life in 1429 – the announcement of her divine mission, her acceptance at the court of Charles VII, the lifting of the siege of Orleans by French forces inspired by Joan, the French victory at Patay and, as a finale, the coronation of Charles VII at Reims.²² As this

was a poem about the triumph of France, Joan's betrayal and execution in 1431 was *not* dealt with in the action of the poem. This basic structure remained in place throughout a series of large-scale rewrites. Southey initially thought of publishing his poem by subscription, but in late 1794 he encountered the Bristol bookseller Joseph Cottle. Cottle was a fellow Radical who, carried away by enthusiasm for Southey's venture, promised to make it an event publication – the 'handsomest book Bristol had ever produced', printed with a new font of type and on the finest paper.²³ As the book was going through the press in May-November 1795, Southey substantially rewrote the text, reducing it to ten books, introducing new characters and slimming down the supernatural element that was traditional in epic poetry.²⁴ His friend and brother-in-law, Samuel Coleridge, also contributed some material to the first four books. *Joan of Arc* (1796) was finally published at the end of 1795. Southey remained unsatisfied, though, and made substantial revisions to the second edition of 1798, removing Coleridge's contributions (the two had fallen out) and all of Book Nine, in which the supernatural elements of the story were concentrated.²⁵ Further editions of 1806, 1812 and, finally, 1837 contained more rewrites, reflecting Southey's continued unhappiness with the poem's language, which he felt did not reflect his mature style.²⁶

This long drawn out process of composition reflected Southey's struggles to find his individual voice as a poet and to break out of the traditional format of the classical epic poem. But such a process also reflected the difficulty of the task he had set himself. By choosing Joan of Arc, as opposed to Henry V, as his hero, he had to find a way of overcoming her, to say the least, negative perception in English minds, in addition to demonstrating that her cause – the French cause –

was entirely justified in the Hundred Years War. Shakespeare in *Henry the Sixth* (1591) had followed English chroniclers, such as Holinshed, in labelling Joan a witch in league with the Devil. This image was still current in the 1790s.²⁷ Southey was outraged by a performance he saw at Covent Garden in February 1798 of 'An entire new Grand Historical Ballet of Action, called Joan of Arc, or the Maid of Orleans', the climax of which was Joan being carried off to Hell by Beelzebub (though in deference to a 1790s audience's expectations of some romance in their ballets, Joan's motives for fighting the English were jealousy of her sister's relationship with the English commander Talbot).²⁸ But sceptical British historians, such as David Hume, whose *History of England* Southey drew on as one of the main initial sources for his poem, were no better for his purposes as they viewed Joan as a deluded fanatic.²⁹ Moreover, while it was unusual, to say the least, to make a woman the central figure in an epic poem, there were some precedents where Joan of Arc was concerned.³⁰ The problem for Southey was that the two most famous poems on Joan, and the only ones likely to be known to a British audience, had tended to make her a subject of ridicule rather than admiration: Jean Chapelain's on the grounds of its universally admitted tedium and Voltaire's because of its obscenity.³¹

Southey's solution was nothing if not Radical. He presented Joan as a French revolutionary of the 1790s, who just happened to be living in the 1420s, and as a member of the French peasantry who represented the striving of ordinary people for a more just society. Inescapable historical facts meant the climax of the poem was her crowning of Charles VII at Reims, but the poem's last section is an impassioned lecture that Joan gives the new King. She announces that she has 'anointed thee/Chief Servant of the People' and warns him not to

lead his people into wars to 'aggrandize thyself' or to ignore 'the feeble cry /Of asking hunger'; his task is to 'feed the hungry ones,/And be the Orphan's father'.
If not,

hireling guards,
Tho' flesh'd in slaughter, would be weak to save
A tyrant on the blood-cemented Throne
That totters underneath him.³²

In other words, the King can rule as long as he serves his people. If he does not, his fate will be that of Louis XVI. The 'Vice & Folly' of the King's court is represented in a persistently unflattering light when compared to Joan's simple, peasant virtues.

Moreover, Joan represents a Rousseauvian religious sensibility, much like the ideas popular among many French revolutionaries (and, at this time, Southey), rather than State-sponsored orthodox Christianity.³³ Joan has been raised in the depths of the forest by Bizardo, an old hermit. As she says to the Doctors of Theology who examine her at the court of Charles VII,

In forest shade my infant years train'd up
Knew not devotion's forms. The chaunted mass,
The silver altar and religious robe,
The mystic wafer and the hallowed cup,
Gods priest-created, are to me unknown.

Instead, to her, 'All nature's voice / Proclaim'd the all-good Parent' – Joan's religion comes from Nature and the heart of man, not the Church.³⁴ And she duly confounds the theologians and goes on to lead the French to victory. So, in Southey's poem, Joan is not a witch or a fanatic; she represents universal republican values – values that are as applicable in England as in France. And she is also a Radical hero who stands in direct contrast to Henry V. Joan is ~~le~~ a peasant rather than a King; and she is a disciple of Rousseau, rather than a pious son of the Church, like Henry V.

Commented [RS1]: Does this refer to Joan or Henry V? I'm assuming the latter as you write 'son', but I'm not sure. Please revise for clarity.

Southey of course also had to demonstrate the justice of the French cause in the Hundred Years War and he did this by making it a theme that runs through the whole poem. From the first Book there are constant reminders that it is the English who are 'The invader'. Of the horrors of the war they have inflicted on France, the poem reads, 'fertile fields laid waste, / Dispeopled hamlets, the lorn widow's groan, / And the pale orphan's feeble cry for bread.'³⁵ The English are persistently accused of war crimes: their

savage fury
 Spares not grey age, and mocks the infant's shriek
 As he does writhe upon his cursed lance,
 And forces to his foul embrace, the wife
 Even on her murder'd husband's gasping corse!'³⁶

They refuse Joan's offer to retire to England in peace and the English commanders Talbot and Falstoffe are represented as boorish and bellicose, though not always (as in Falstoffe's case) particularly brave. After Joan defeats

them and crowns Charles VII at Reims, the poem ends with the prayer 'Ever may the ALL-JUST/Give to the arms of FREEDOM such success' thus making it clear that the French victory is to be seen as a triumph for justice and one that English readers should endorse.³⁷

But Southey could not write a poem on the Hundred Years War and just ignore Agincourt. If he was going to change his audience's view of that conflict (and thus hopefully of the Anglo-French war in the 1790s) he had to make them see what they regarded as the most important battle of the Hundred Years War in an entirely different light. So, rather than it being the centrepiece of his poem, it is merely recounted in retrospect in Book Two of *Joan of Arc*, which makes it clear that Agincourt was not the most important event of the Hundred Years War. While it was an English victory, it should not give English readers confidence that they would defeat Revolutionary France as Agincourt had been followed by the French victories at Orleans and Patay, the main features of *Joan of Arc* (1796). But Southey did not leave matters there. He attempted to thoroughly dismantle Agincourt's image as a glorious victory that could inspire Englishmen to revel in conflict with France. He did this by having the events of Agincourt recounted by an old Frenchman, Bertram, who had fought there, thus giving his readers an account of the battle (which significantly Southey gives its French name, Azincour) from a French perspective. Bertram describes the valour of French leaders, particularly Charles, Duc d'Orleans (a poet, so a favourite of Southey's) and provides a melancholy roll call of the many noble French dead.³⁸ Southey also reverses the usual image of the French superiority in numbers in the battle by not describing its early stages and concentrating on its final moments, when it is Orleans and Bertram who are surrounded, wounded and

outnumbered: 'Like wolves they hemm'd us in / Fierce in unhop'd conquest:
all around / Our dead and dying countrymen lay heap'd.'³⁹

After the battle is over Southey makes a crucial point about how his audience should interpret this English victory. In Shakespeare's *Henry the Fifth* matters are seen from the English perspective: it is reported that the King has learnt that the treacherous French have looted his supply train and massacred the 'boys' charged with guarding it 'expressly/against the law of arms.'⁴⁰ In response, the King orders the killing of his French prisoners. In *Joan of Arc* matters are seen from the French perspective: Bertram has fought valiantly in the battle and is a prisoner – he knows nothing about events at the supply train and Southey does not mention them. All Bertram knows is that the King has ordered the bound prisoners to be slaughtered – he escapes because his captor refuses to follow the King's orders: 'my arm shrinks at murder'.⁴¹ Here it is the English, not the French, who end the battle with a war crime – the killing of prisoners of war.

Southey made no mention in *Joan of Arc* (1796) of the English bowmen and their commoners' victory over the French knights (they only merited two lines in the second edition of 1798).⁴² Instead, he concentrated on Henry V; and the murder of the French captives is not the end of the poem's condemnation of the English King. Bertram has had the bad luck to be trapped with his family inside Rouen, when it was besieged by Henry V in 1418-19. Bertram recounts that Henry's 'ambitious ear best pleas'd / With the War's clamor and the groan of Death, / Was deaf to prayer' on behalf of the suffering inhabitants and that he refused to let the children, old and infirm leave the city. Instead 'he relax'd / His stern face into savage merriment, / Scoffing their agonies.'⁴³ When Southey

revised his poem in 1798, the footnotes to Book Two were expanded to give yet more evidence of Henry's monstrous behaviour: his 'despotic barbarity' in expelling the population of Harfleur; execution of several leading citizens of Caen; and making the noble French captives at Agincourt wait on him at dinner after the battle.⁴⁴ In fact, Southey declared 'the more I learn of his character the more detestable it appears' and he took to referring to him as 'our wicked Henry the fifth, whom I take to be as bad a man as ever wore a crown'.⁴⁵ So instead of Agincourt as a victory for the English bowman, it becomes in *Joan of Arc* a victory by an English King – and the very worst of English Kings, disgraced by a record of war crimes and barbarity. To ram this point home, when Joan is taken on a Dantean tour of the underworld in Book Nine, she encounters Henry V in Hell, where he is identified, with considerable irony, as 'The hero conqueror of Azincour'. His place is among the 'MURDERERS OF MANKIND' and he confesses to Joan, 'I sent abroad/MURDER and RAPE; and therefore am I doom'd'.⁴⁶ The contrast between the actions of Royalty and the heroic peasant Joan of Arc could not be more direct: it embodied the contrast between what Monarchy stood for both in the fifteenth century and the 1790s, and the ideals of the Revolution that were embodied in the ordinary people of France.

Southey's systematic dismantling of the celebratory view of Agincourt was a *succes de scandale*. It sold out, despite its high price of one guinea, leading to a second edition in 1798. In all it was reprinted thirteen times before 1855. Generally, Radical reviewers admired *Joan* (1796) and saw its political point straight away. Indeed, Southey later admitted that its politics alone, rather than any poetical merits, secured his work good reviews among some literary journals, while establishing his notoriety with others.⁴⁷ The Radical *Monthly*

Review was clear that Southey had 'chosen the subject with a view to modern application' and quoted Joan's encounter with Henry V in Hell at length 'as a specimen of the poet's political sentiments'.⁴⁸ The conservative reviewers of the *Anti-Jacobin* were, on the other hand, furious: 'Is there not a squint of malignity – a treacherous allusion in such a picture? And was it not a seditious rather than a poetic spirit that first contemplated the Maid of Orleans, as the heroine of an English epic?'⁴⁹ Anna Seward was moved to write her own poetic response in the *Morning Chronicle*, in which she particularly attacked Southey's portrayal of Henry V, 'who grac'd the Crown he wore, BRITANNIA's boast', and his attempt 'to turn to deadliest Aconite / The laurel wreaths of Azincour'. For Seward it was crucial to defend Henry's reputation, as this was central to the whole justification of the English position in the Hundred Years War (and thus by implication the war in the 1790s). To Seward, Henry was entirely correct in waging war on France: 'What claim'd he then/From France at the sword's point, but ceded rights?'. Seward contended that Henry was not guilty of war crimes as he fought for 'ENGLAND, whose martial fire / Applauding ages have pronounc'd adorn'd / With fair munificence'.⁵⁰ Seward urged Southey not to waste his time on lamenting the French dead of the Hundred Years War, but consider those killed by the French Revolutionaries – thus slipping into her poem her own justification for waging war in the 1790s.

Joan of Arc (1796) was so disliked by conservatives (but so well-known) that it became a shorthand for Southey himself – when he was portrayed as a jackass-headed worshipper at the Cornucopia of Ignorance in James Gillray's famous cartoon 'New Morality', he was identified simply by the copy of *Joan of Arc* sticking out of his pocket.⁵¹ But the wider impact of his attempt to transform

English ways of looking at the Hundred Years War was much less clear-cut. *Joan of Arc* was part of the revival in epic writing in Britain at the end of the eighteenth century and some of these epics followed Southey in taking a Radical approach – for example, *Alfred, an Epic Poem in Twenty-Four Books* (1800) by Southey's friend and publisher Joseph Cottle.⁵² But most of these poems were staunchly conservative, such as the Poet Laureate, Henry Pye's, take on *Alfred; an Epic Poem in Six Books* (1801), or Sir James Bland Burges's *Richard the First, a Poem: In Eighteen Books* (1801). The Hundred Years War did not become a popular setting for epic poetry – only Margaret Holford Hodson's *Margaret of Anjou; a Poem, in Ten Cantos* (1816) followed Southey in this and only Thomas Northmore's *Washington, or Liberty Restored: a Poem, in Ten Books* (1809) was brave enough to take England's defeat as its central theme. Some Radical writers, such as William Hazlitt, agreed with Southey in expressing their contempt for Henry V – to Hazlitt he was 'fond of war and low company' – but this certainly did not become the predominant view.⁵³ Similarly, Southey failed to shake established views about Joan of Arc and make her into a popular heroine in Britain. Her rehabilitation would have to wait until the early-twentieth-century, when she was first taken up by the suffragettes, and then portrayed in official propaganda as a symbol of French heroism in the First World War.⁵⁴ Agincourt continued to be celebrated as a great English victory, especially in times of war, down to the twentieth century, as witnessed by Arthur Machen's First World War story 'The Bowmen' and Laurence Olivier's patriotic film *Henry V* (1944).⁵⁵ Southey was certainly not able to inspire a revisionist school of criticism of the battle.

Even Southey modified his views. He never disclaimed *Joan of Arc*, or rewrote its political message, but his opinion of the justifiability of war with France radically altered. After Napoleon became Emperor of the French in 1804, Southey increasingly supported the British war effort as an attempt to defeat a tyrant who rivalled Henry V. Once France invaded Spain and Portugal in 1807-8, he saw the war as a struggle of national liberation that must be supported at all costs.⁵⁶ He celebrated the final defeat of France at Waterloo in 1815 with *The Poet's Pilgrimage to Waterloo* (1816). Agincourt became one of the English victories over France that Southey was happy to mention in some of his later poems, such as his 'Funeral Song for Princess Charlotte' (1817) and 'Ode for St George's Day' (1821).⁵⁷ By this time Southey had moved a long way from his earlier Radicalism and become a rather idiosyncratic conservative and Poet Laureate. His view of Henry V took a long time to alter, though – the King was notably not included in the 'The Sovereigns' celebrated in Southey's *A Vision of Judgement* (1821), despite at least one of Southey's friends urging the monarch's merits.⁵⁸

By the time Southey wrote his *Lives of the British Admirals* in the 1830s, he had come to some final conclusions about the events he had written about forty years before. Agincourt, he conceded was 'one of those ever-memorable victories, the remembrance of which continues to support the national spirit whereby they are achieved'.⁵⁹ But he still believed when looking at Henry V's wars, 'no Englishman can delight to dwell upon the details ... Henry was a merciless conqueror and made himself feared'. The best Southey would say about Henry was that at least some of his piety was genuine: 'though ambition

Commented [RS2]: Is this a reference for the point that 'Agincourt became one of the English victories over France that Southey was happy to mention in some of his later poems' or for his poems 'Funeral Song for Princess Charlotte' (1817) and 'Ode for St George's Day' (1821)? If the former, the editors' names need to appear first in reference. If the latter, Southey's name and the names of the poems should come first. I've amended this note.

and policy may have entered largely into his motives, devotion also moved him'.⁶⁰

Looking at Southey's lack of success in redefining perceptions of Agincourt and his own gradual retreat from his early Radicalism, one conclusion might be that Agincourt was simply one of those battles whose significance in British culture was too deeply-entrenched to be successfully challenged. It was only in the particular circumstances of the 1790s, when a war with France was deeply opposed by substantial sections of British opinion, that there was any possibility of contesting these ideas, and then only fleetingly. However, this view needs some qualification. *Joan of Arc* (1796) was not the only work that Southey wrote in the 1790s that was set during the Hundred Years War. He also composed an unproduced play in 1794, entitled *Wat Tyler*.⁶¹

The theme of this play was the leader of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 and in three acts it takes the audience from the origins of the rebellion in Wat's village to his defeat at Blackheath by the forces of Richard II. The play rehearses many of the themes of *Joan of Arc*: *Wat Tyler* represents the virtuous common people standing up against injustice and tyranny and the priest John Ball articulates the Rousseauvian 'natural religion' that *Joan of Arc* espouses. The contemporary applications were obvious, just as in *Joan of Arc*, as Southey celebrated in the peasant rebels of 1381 some early forerunners of the English Radicals of the 1790s. But *Wat Tyler* was also, as explicitly as *Joan of Arc* (1796), a protest against the war with France. The revolt is ignited in Act One by the depredations of a tax gatherer and Tyler and his friend Hob make clear that the unjust taxes are being levied to

madly prosecute the war; -
 Draining our wealth – distressing our poor peasants –
 Slaughtering our youths – and all to crown our chiefs
 With glory!

Tyler follows this with the declamation

Think ye, my friend,
 That I – a humble blacksmith, here at Deptford,
 Would part with these six groats – earn'd by hard toil,
 All that I have! to massacre the Frenchmen,
 Murder as enemies men I never saw!
 Did not the state compel me?'⁶²

The play was not published by Ridgway and Symonds, the Radical publishers to whom Southey had delivered it in 1794. But, much to his embarrassment, it appeared in 1817, when Southey's views had substantially changed. His attempt to halt its publication by an injunction failed over a copyright dispute. The fact that it was authored by someone who was, by then, a well-known conservative writer made the authorities wary of the embarrassment that might be caused if anyone publishing it was prosecuted for sedition. As a result, *Wat Tyler* became one of the most explicitly revolutionary publications to make its way into the public domain in the late 1810s and, as the copyright was disputed, anyone could publish it in cheap editions without paying Southey a penny. As a result, it may have sold as many as sixty-thousand copies

in thirteen editions, some priced as low as 2d.⁶³ Ironically, *Wat Tyler* became Southey's best-selling work, allowing him, for once, to surpass the sales of Byron and Sir Walter Scott. The play's widespread dissemination became a key event in making Radical texts available in the repressive political atmosphere after 1815.

Southey was mortified. Despite his best efforts in 1817, he had given an enormous boost to Wat Tyler's reputation as a Radical hero. Southey's play became a favourite of Chartist leaders like George Julian Harney and was quoted widely in the Chartist Press and in the movement's verse and ballad sheets. Wat Tyler has continued to be celebrated: he appeared on banners at Reform League demonstrations in 1867, he figured in William Morris's *The Dream of John Ball* (1886-87), the Labour-controlled London County Council named a road after him in 1934 and the Communist composer Alan Bush wrote an opera entitled *Wat Tyler* (1951). On the six-hundredth anniversary of the Peasants' Revolt in 1981 Tyler was commemorated by everything from a Socialist Workers Party pamphlet by Paul Foot to a speech by Tony Benn at Blackheath.⁶⁴

The younger, Radical Southey failed in his project to contest Agincourt's place in British culture. But he was crucial in establishing Wat Tyler's importance as a symbol for Radicals – someone from the Hundred Years War who could be celebrated as an alternative to the cult of Henry V. In doing so, Southey cemented one way in which Agincourt could be problematised. Wat Tyler claimed in Southey's play that the French were not his enemies; his enemy was in England – those who ran the English State, who sought to involve him in wars which only served to glorify those in power. The real enemy of ordinary English people was at home, not abroad – in France or elsewhere. The people's

interests and the cause of justice would be much better served by concentrating on reform in England than on aggressive wars. By making this critique, Southey ensured his arguments about the Hundred Years War could become part of the ways in which British radicalism looked at the past and he helped to provide it with alternative events and heroes to commemorate.

¹ B. Korte and R. Schneider (eds), *War and the Cultural Construction of Identities in Britain* (Amsterdam, 2002); A. Curry, *Great Battles: Agincourt* (Oxford, 2015), a superb survey of the battle and its remembrance, by the leading authority in the field, naturally does not deal with attacks on the celebratory status of Agincourt from within English culture as it concentrates on the enduring appeal of Agincourt to English audiences. The early paragraphs of this article are indebted to Curry's work.

² See A. Calder, *The People's War: Britain, 1939-1945* (London, 1969) for a pioneering example in this field that both records and argues for alternative versions of World War Two in British history.

³ R. Southey, *Joan of Arc 1796* in *Robert Southey: Poetical Works 1793-1810*, ed. L. Pratt, 5 vols (London, 2004), I, pp. 1-194. The term 'Hundred Years War' is used for convenience in this article to describe the series of Anglo-French conflicts of 1337-1453. The term itself probably only dates to the early nineteenth century.

⁴ W. A. Speck, *Robert Southey: Entire Man of Letters* (New Haven, 2006), pp. 74-5.

⁵ See, for instance, Lynda Pratt 'Patriot Poetics and the Romantic National Epic: Placing and Displacing Southey's *Joan of Arc*', in P. J. Kitson (ed.), *Placing and Displacing Romanticism* (Aldershot, 1996), pp. 88-105; C. Addison, 'The Maiden on the Battlefield: War and Estrangement in Southey's *Joan of Arc*', *Romanticism on the Net*, 32-33 (2003-4), <http://www.erudit.org/revue/ron/2003/v/n32-33/009262ar.html>; J. Kilgore, 'Une Heroine Anglaise? La Jeanne d'Arc de Robert Southey', in L. Fournier-Finocchiaro (ed.), *Les Mères de la Patrie: Représentations et Constructions d'une Figure Nationale* (Caen, 2006), pp. 159-77.

⁶ Curry, *Agincourt*, pp. 51-2; D. Cressy, *Bonfires and Bells: National Memory and the Protestant Calendar in Elizabethan and Stuart England* (Berkeley, 1989).

⁷ Curry, *Agincourt*, pp. 78-90.

⁸ H. Deeming, 'The Sources and Origin of the "Agincourt Carol"', *Early Music*, 35 (2007), 23-38; A. Curry, *The Battle of Agincourt: Sources and Interpretations* (Woodbridge, 2000), pp. 292-98; James Shapiro, *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare* (London, 2006).

⁹ H. Kleineke, 'The Legend of Agincourt in Parliament', *The History of Parliament*, <<https://thehistoryofparliament.wordpress.com/2013/10/25/the-legend-of->

agincourt-in-parliament/>; W. Shakespeare, *The Life of Henry the Fifth* (London, 1599), IV. iii. 60.

¹⁰ Curry, *Agincourt*, p. 62.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 101-2. For the history of the performance of *The Life of Henry the Fifth*, see E. Smith, *Shakespeare in Production: Henry V* (Cambridge, 2002).

¹² The literature on radicalism, conservatism and the war against France in the 1790s is extensive. Important contributions include, H. T. Dickinson (ed.), *Britain and the French Revolution, 1789-1815* (Basingstoke, 1989); R. Dozier, *For King, Constitution and Country: the English Loyalists and the French Revolution* (Lexington, 1983); C. Emsley, *British Society and the French Wars, 1793-1815* (Basingstoke, 1979); A. Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty: the English Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution* (London, 1979); J. Graham, *The Nation, the Law and the King: Reform Politics in England, 1789-1799* (Oxford, 2000); I. McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840* (Cambridge, 1988); E. V. Macleod, *A War of Ideas: British Attitudes to the War against Revolutionary France, 1792-1802* (Aldershot, 1998); M. Philp (ed.), *The French Revolution and British Popular Politics* (Cambridge, 1991).

¹³ M. Woodcock, *Shakespeare - Henry V* (Basingstoke, 2008), p. 37; [‘Theatre Royal, Drury Lane’ Author?, Article title?, Morning Post, 25 November 1803, p. 2, page numbers?](#)

¹⁴ *The Poetical Works of Michael Drayton, Esq.* (Edinburgh, 1793); *King Henry the Fifth’s Conquest of France, in Revenge for the French King, in sending him, instead of the Tribute, Three Tennis Balls* (London, 1795); [‘New songs by Mr](#)

[Dibdin', Author?, Article title?](#), *Bury and Norwich Post*, 30 October 1793, [p. 3](#)

announcing the publication of Dibdin's song.

¹⁵ ['London, November 2' Author?, Article title?](#), *Oxford Journal*, 3 November 1792, [p. 3](#) [page numbers?](#); J. Boydell, *A Description of Several Pictures Presented to the Corporation of the City of London* (London, 1794), pp. 24-7.

¹⁶ 'His Majesty's Reign', *Hampshire Telegraph*, 31 October 1803, [p. 2](#) [page numbers?](#)

¹⁷ G. Kelly, *The English Jacobin Novel, 1780-1805* (Oxford, 1976); M. Scrivener (ed.), *Poetry and Reform: Periodical Verse from the English Democratic Press, 1792-1824* (Detroit, 1992); W. A. Speck, *Literature and Society in Eighteenth-Century England: Ideology, Politics and Culture, 1680-1820* (Harlow, 1998), pp. 145-99.

¹⁸ R. Southey, *History of Brazil*, 3 vols (London, 1810-1819) and *History of the Peninsular War*, 3 vols (London, 1823-1832); *The Life and Correspondence of Robert Southey*, ed. C. C. Southey, 6 vols (London, 1849-50), I, pp. 118-121.

¹⁹ R. Southey to G. C. Bedford, 14-21 July 1793, *The Collected Letters of Robert Southey: Part One*, ed. L. Pratt (2009), https://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/southey_letters/Part_One/HTML/letterEEEd.26.53.html.

²⁰ Southey, *Joan of Arc* 1796, p. 5.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²² Houghton Library, Harvard, MS. Eng. 265.3, R. Southey, 'Joan of Arc' (1793).

Southey made a second transcription, with a few alterations, University of Rochester Library, Rochester, New York, MS AS727, R. Southey, 'Joan of Arc' (1793).

²³ R. Southey, *Poetical Works*, 10 vols (London, 1837-8), I, p. xix.

²⁴ British Library, Add. MS 28096, R. Southey, 'Joan of Arc' (1796).

²⁵ R. Southey to C.W.W. Wynn, 19 July 1797, *Collected Letters*,
<https://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/southey_letters/Part_One/HTML/letterEEd.26.237.html> contains an outline of Southey's plan for *Joan of Arc*, 2 vols (Bristol, 1798).

²⁶ R. Southey, *Joan of Arc* (London, 1806); *Joan of Arc* (London, 1812); *Poetical Works*, I, pp. xxxi-xxxiii.

²⁷ W. Shakespeare, *The First Part of Henry the Sixth* (1591), V. iii. 1-29.

²⁸ Southey to Tom Southey, 18 February 1798, *The Collected Letters of Robert Southey: Part Two*, ed. L. Pratt and I. Packer (2011),
<www.rc.umd.edu/editions/southey_letters/Part_Two/HTML/letterEEd.26.288.html>.

²⁹ D. Hume, *The History of England, from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688*, 8 vols (London, 1763), III, pp. 148-51.

³⁰ The importance of Southey's selection of a heroine, rather than a hero, has been explored extensively: see E. Beshero-Bondar, *Women, Epic and Transition in British Romanticism* (Newark, 2011), pp. 59-65. Southey greatly admired a number of contemporary women active in politics, an opinion he made public in 'To Mary Wollstonecraft', *Poems* (Bristol, 1797) [p. 3].

³¹ J. Chapelain, *La Pucelle ou la France Délivrée* (Paris, 1656); Voltaire, *La Pucelle d'Orléans* (Paris, 1762). Southey had read neither poem – Southey, *Joan of Arc* 1796, p. 7.

³² Southey, *Joan of Arc* 1796, p. 178.

³³ See Southey to H. W. Bedford, 25 July[-c. 5 August] 1793, *Collected Letters*,

<[https://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/southey_letters/Part_One/HTML/letterEEEd.](https://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/southey_letters/Part_One/HTML/letterEEEd.26.54.html)

26.54.html> for Southey's religious ideas whilst writing the first manuscript of 'Joan of Arc' (1793).

³⁴ Southey, *Joan of Arc* 1796, p. 51.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁴⁰ Shakespeare, *Henry the Fifth*, IV. iii. 1-2.

⁴¹ Southey, *Joan of Arc* 1796, p. 37.

⁴² R. Southey, *Joan of Arc* 1798 in *Robert Southey: Poetical Works 1793-1810*, ed. L. Pratt, 5 vols (London, 2004), I, pp. 195-480 (p. 255).

⁴³ Southey, *Joan of Arc* 1796, pp. 38, 40.

⁴⁴ Southey *Joan of Arc* 1798, pp. 423, 424, 421. Southey's antipathy to Henry V spilled over into his short poem, 'King Henry and the Hermit of Dreux', *Morning Post*, 24 September 1798, [p. 3, pages?](#).

⁴⁵ Southey to C. W. W. Wynn, 16 August 1797, *Collected Letters*,

<[https://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/southey_letters/Part_One/HTML/letterEEEd.](https://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/southey_letters/Part_One/HTML/letterEEEd.26.249.html)

26.249.html>; and Southey to John May, 15 August 1797, *Collected Letters*,

<[https://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/southey_letters/Part_One/HTML/letterEEEd.](https://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/southey_letters/Part_One/HTML/letterEEEd.26.247.html)

26.247.html>.

⁴⁶ Southey, *Joan of Arc* 1796, pp. 154-55.

⁴⁷ Southey, *Poetical Works*, I, pp. xxix-xxx.

⁴⁸ [Anonymous review of *Joan of Arc* \(1796\) in author? Article title? Monthly Review, n.s.](#) 19 ([April](#) 1796), 362, 367.

⁴⁹ *Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine*, 3 (June 1799), 121.

⁵⁰ A. Seward, [‘Written by Anna Seward, after reading Southey’s *Joan of Arc*’, Article title? Morning Chronicle](#), 5 August 1797, [p. 3, pages?](#)

⁵¹ J. Gilray, ‘New Morality’, *Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine*, 1 (July 1798), facing 115.

⁵² S. Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 158-79; H. F. Tucker, *Epic: Britain’s Heroic Muse, 1790-1910* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 49-92.

⁵³ W. Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespear’s Plays* (London, 1817), p. 132.

⁵⁴ L. Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign, 1907-14* (Chicago, IL, 1988), pp. 209-11; J. Kilgore, ‘Joan of Arc as a Propaganda Motif from the Dreyfus Affair to the Second World War’, *Literature, History of Ideas, Images and Societies of the English-Speaking World*, 6:1 (2008), 279-96.

⁵⁵ A. Machen, ‘The Bowmen’, *Evening News*, 29 September 1914. See Curry, *Agincourt*, pp. 102-114, 122-140 for continued celebration of Agincourt in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

⁵⁶ The complex evolution of Southey’s political views can be traced in Speck, *Robert Southey*, pp. 101-53 and D. Craig, *Robert Southey and Romantic Apostasy: Political Argument in Britain, 1780-1840* (Woodbridge, 2007), pp. 45-123.

⁵⁷ [R. Southey, *The Poet’s Pilgrimage to Waterloo* \(1816\). ‘Funeral Song for Princess Charlotte’ \(1817\) and ‘Ode for St George’s Day’ \(1821\) in *Robert Southey: Later Poetical Works, 1811-1838*, ed. L. Pratt and T. Fulford, 4 vols \(London, 2012\), III, pp. 221-375, 129, 178.](#)

Formatted: Font: Italic

Formatted: Font: Italic

⁵⁸ Southey to C. W. W. Wynn, 4 April 1821, *Selections from the Letters of Robert Southey*, ed. J. W. Warton (4 vols, London, 1856), III, p. 244.

⁵⁹ R. Southey, *Lives of the British Admirals, with an Introductory View of the Naval History of England*, 5 vols (London, 1833-40), II, p. 53.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁶¹ *Wat Tyler. A Dramatic Poem* in *Robert Southey: Later Poetical Works, 1811-1838*, ed. L. Pratt and T. Fulford (4 vols, London, 2012), III, pp. 441-506. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Page numbers will follow in brackets. Southey himself did not publish this work until his *Poetical Works*, II, pp. 21-54.

⁶² *Wat Tyler*, pp. 470-471.

⁶³ [D. E. White, Author?](#), 'Introduction' to *Wat Tyler*, pp. 442-49; *Life and Correspondence of Robert Southey*, ed. C. C. Southey, IV, p. 251; W. St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 316-18.

⁶⁴ A. Taylor, *London's Burning: Pulp Fiction, the Politics of Terrorism and the Destruction of the Capital in British Popular Culture, 1840-2005* (London, 2012), pp. 22-3, 28-30; H. Ottaway, 'Alan Bush's "Wat Tyler"', *Musical Times*, 97 (1956), 633-36; P. Foot, 'This Bright Day of Summer': *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381* (London, 1981); ['Wat every revolutionary should know now' Author?, Article title?, Guardian](#), 5 May 1981, [p. 4 pages?](#).